Information Document
June, 1989

1990: INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR (ILY)

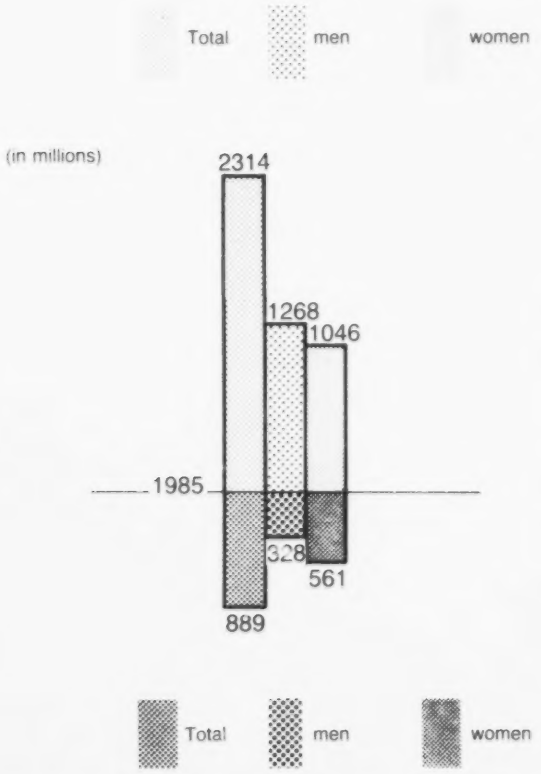
1. The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 1990 as International Literacy Year (ILY) and has invited Unesco to assume the role of lead organization for the preparation and observance of the Year. This action was in response to an appeal made by the General Conference of Unesco at its twenty-third session in 1985 to proclaim an international year the observance of which would contribute to greater understanding by world public opinion of the various aspects of the problem of illiteracy and to intensified efforts to spread literacy and education.

Facts and figures

2. In 1985, there were an estimated 889 million adult illiterates in the world (figure 1), more than a quarter of the adult population (figure 2). There were also more than 100 million children of primary school-age in the developing nations (figure 4) who were not enrolled in school. These children are in danger of becoming the adult illiterates of the twenty-first century, unless prompt remedial action is taken. The majority of adult illiterates are women, the illiteracy rate being 34.9 per cent for women as compared to 20.5 per cent for men (figure 5). In the developing nations, where nearly 98 per cent of the world's illiterates live, the differential between illiteracy rates for women and men is 21 percentage points: an estimated 48.9 per cent of women are illiterate as compared to 27.9 per cent of men. Asia alone counts 666 million illiterates, three-quarters of the world total (figure 3). The highest *rate* of illiteracy, however, is in Africa, 54 per cent of the adult population, as compared with 36 per cent in Asia and 17 per cent in Latin America. With

Figure 1

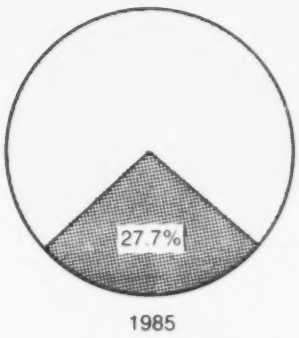
Number of literate adults (15 years +) in the world



Number of illiterate adults (15 years +) in the world

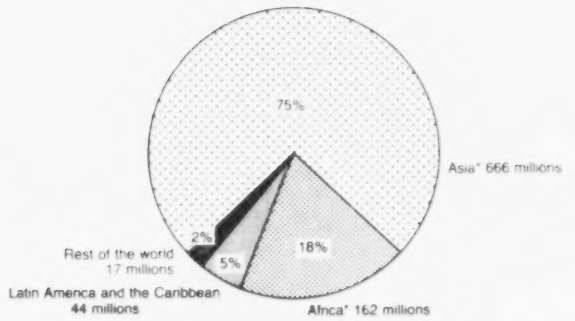
The logo for International Literacy Year was designed by Kohichi Imakita, a Japanese graphic artist. The artist explains that the logo represents humanity reading. Mr Imakita's design was chosen from among 300 entries from 82 countries in a contest organized by the International Association of Arts.

Figure 2



Percentage of illiterates in the world's adult population, 1985

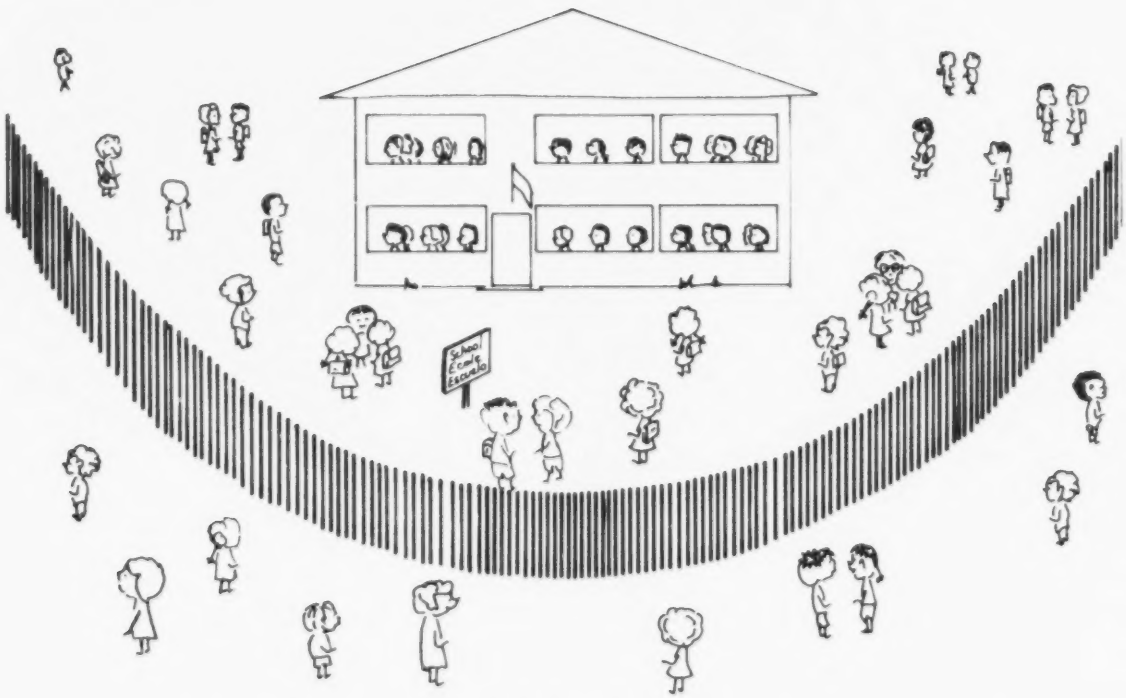
Figure 3



* The Arab States are included in the totals for Asia and Africa

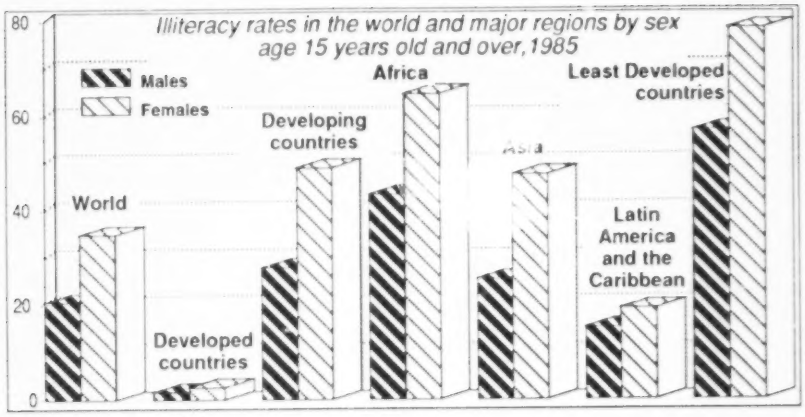
Distribution of illiterates by region

Figure 4



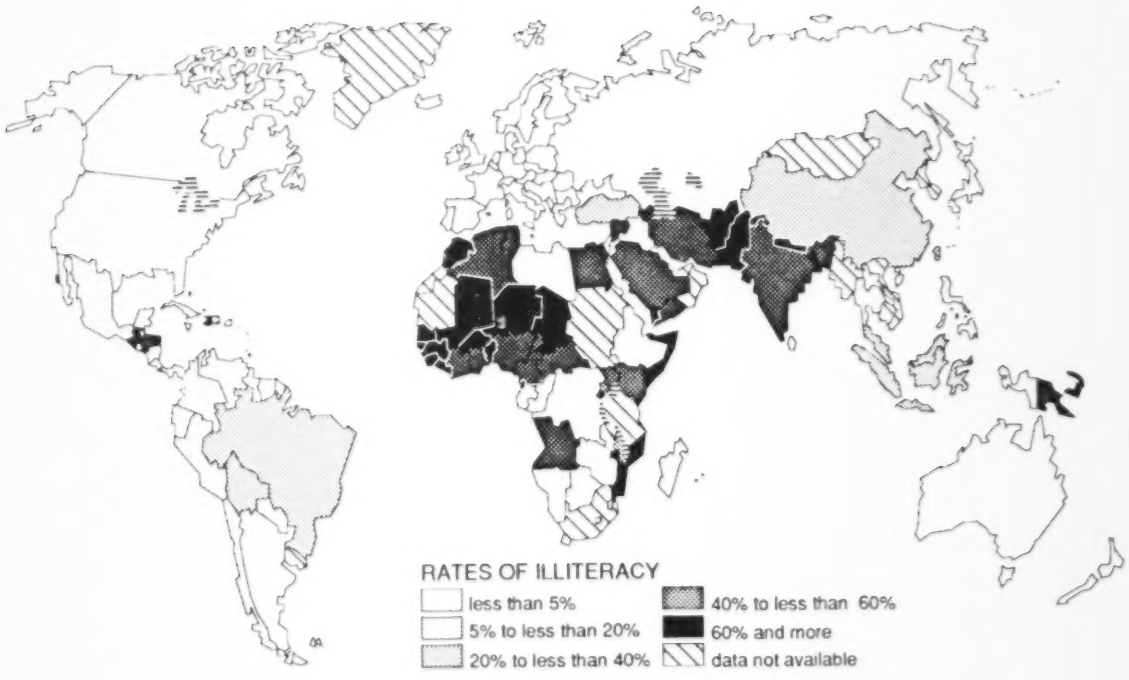
More than 100 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 years living in the developing countries are not enrolled in school. Are they to become the adult illiterates of the twenty-first century?

Figure 5



The male/female gap: women lag behind

Figure 6



Illiteracy: a world view

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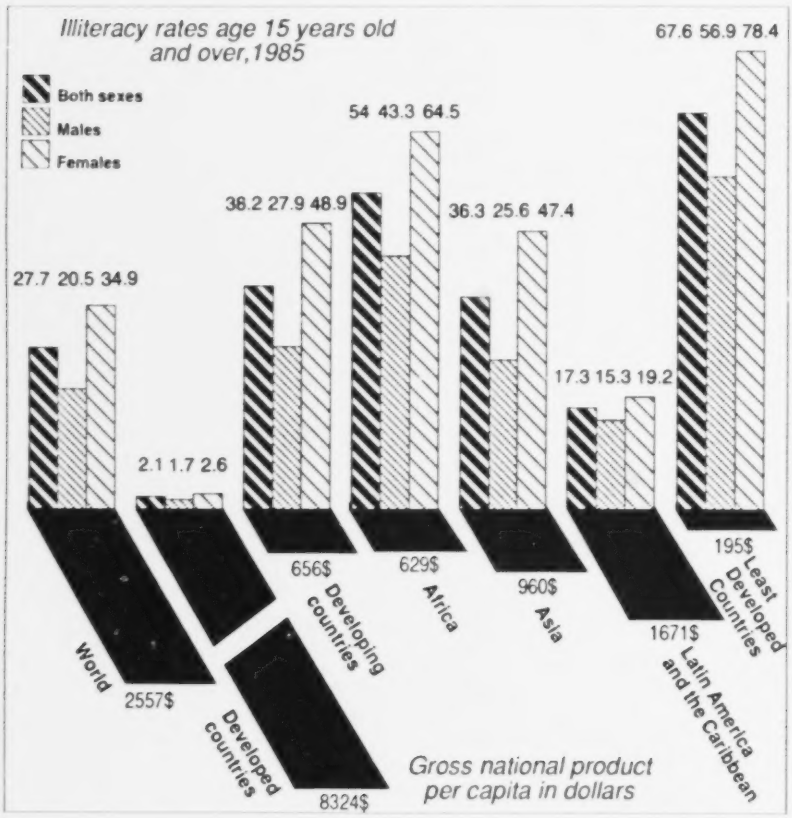
few exceptions, illiteracy goes hand in hand with poverty (figure 7). One may debate the extent to which illiteracy is a cause or a consequence of poverty, but there can be little doubt about the linkage between education and economic well-being. These statistics demonstrate that illiteracy is one of the major global problems of our era. It is, however, a problem which can and, in many developing nations, is being solved through persevering effort. Indeed, the percentage of illiterates in the adult population is steadily declining even as the absolute number of illiterates, propelled by population growth, continues to increase.

Postal services around the world will issue stamps on the occasion of International Literacy Year.

Figure 7

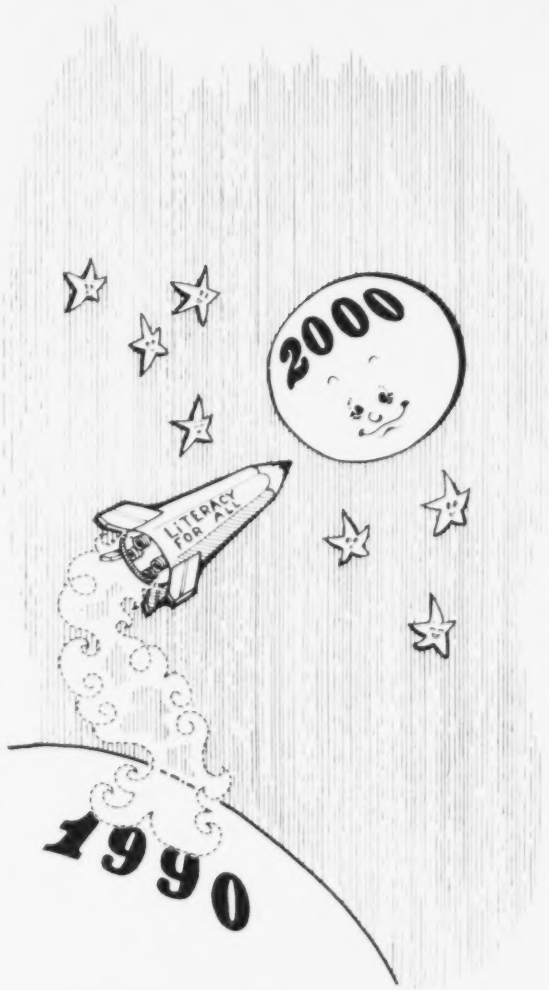


The rate of illiteracy compared to Gross National Product per capita. Source: Unesco Office of Statistics.

3. Even the highly industrialized countries are affected by illiteracy. Many of these States, in which the problem of illiteracy seemed to have been solved fifty or more years ago, have recently discovered a related phenomenon: functional illiteracy, which affects 10 per cent or more of the population. The functionally illiterate possess reading and writing skills inadequate to cope with the requirements of the complex living and working environments of modern societies. Frequently, functional illiteracy is discovered when changes in technology eliminate routine jobs and it becomes necessary to retrain employees to perform new and more complex tasks. Because of inadequate basic skills, such training is rendered difficult or impossible. To confront this situation, which imposes a costly competitive handicap upon the societies most affected, literacy initiatives are being launched in industrialized countries with the support of governments, employers and voluntary organizations. Efforts are also being made to deal with the problem at its source: to identify the reading problems of children at an early age and to remediate them before they lead to frustration, alienation from school and drop-out. Functional illiteracy affects all parts of society, but often strikes hardest minorities and under-privileged groups.

Plan of Action

4. The proclamation of International Literacy Year is linked to the formulation of a Plan of Action to assist Member States in all regions of the world to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000. This is an ambitious goal intended to motivate the international community—and national communities around the world—to undertake major initiatives to promote education. Is the goal achievable? No society has completely eliminated illiteracy. There will always remain a small minority who, because of mental or physical handicaps, will encounter serious difficulties in reading and writing. But even if the goal cannot be achieved 100 per cent, substantial progress is both possible and essential. Certainly, the vast majority of adults can be brought into contact with the culture of print, their mystification giving way to understanding, and it is not too much to expect that all the world's children will be able to find a place in school by the end of the century. One of the principal objectives of ILY is to create favourable conditions for launching world, regional and national plans of action by mobilizing international public opinion in support of literacy efforts. Unesco's Plan of Action will be built upon regional programmes for promoting literacy which have been launched during the past decade in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Africa, in Asia and the Pacific and in the Arab States. Additional support for the struggle against illiteracy will derive from the World Conference on Education for All which will be held in Thailand in March, 1990 under the joint sponsorship of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, The World Bank and Unesco. This Conference will have as its goal the planning and programming of ways to meet basic learning needs, including the provision of literacy skills: the essential means for enabling individuals to continue and control their own education.



Objectives

5. The objectives for International Literacy Year approved by the twenty-fourth session of the Unesco General Conference in the autumn of 1987 are:

(i) increasing action by the governments of Member States afflicted by illiteracy or functional illiteracy to eliminate these problems, particularly through education in rural areas and urban slums, in favour of women and girls and among populations and groups having special educational problems or needs;

(ii) increasing public awareness of the scope, nature and implications of illiteracy as well as of the means and conditions for combating it. In particular, an effort should be made to alert public opinion to the rate of illiteracy among adult women and its implications for the well-being of their children, the lower rate of school participation among girls than among boys and the association between illiteracy, on the one hand, and poverty, under-development and economic, social and cultural exclusion on the other;

(iii) increasing popular participation, within and among countries, in efforts to combat illiteracy, particularly through activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations, voluntary associations and community groups;

(iv) increasing co-operation and solidarity among Member States in the struggle against illiteracy;

(v) increasing co-operation within the United Nations system and, more generally, among all intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the struggle against illiteracy;

(vi) using International Literacy Year for launching the Plan of Action for the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 and for addressing issues of critical importance to the progress of literacy such as reducing primary-school drop-out and establishing post-literacy programmes to prevent relapse into illiteracy.

ILY Secretariat

6. In order to discharge Unesco's responsibility for the preparation and observance of ILY, the Director-General has created a special International Literacy Year Secretariat. To support the ILY Secretariat, an Intersectoral Task Force for International Literacy Year has also been set up by the Director-General who chaired its first meeting. The Task Force is led by the Assistant Director-General for Education. Its members include the Assistant Director-General for Culture and Communication, the Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences, the Director of the Office of Public Information and the Co-ordinator for activities relating to the status of women. Each principal Regional Office (Amman, Bangkok, Dakar and Santiago de Chile) has created a regional task force for ILY and for activities related to the implementation of the Plan of Action. In response to the appeal of the Director-General, more than forty States have already established national committees or other structures to plan and carry out national programmes for ILY. Others are in the process of doing so. In brief, the mobilization for ILY is well underway.

7. Unesco's International Literacy Year Secretariat sees its role principally as that of facilitating action by others: by Member States, NGOs, by United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations and by the mass media. In response to the questionnaire for the preparation of International Literacy Year, Unesco's Member States were emphatic that ILY should not in any way detract from the resources available to support literacy work in the field, but that in keeping with the United Nations *Guidelines for International Years*, approved by the General Assembly, it should be funded mainly from voluntary contributions. Unesco is deeply grateful for the support, in cash or in kind, extended to the preparation of International Literacy Year by Canada, Finland, Japan, Norway and Sweden.

Principles of action

8. A number of governments are planning large-scale actions which will be launched during International Literacy Year. In terms of the numbers to be reached, the initiative of China is the most ambitious. During 1990, China will launch a major campaign designed to reach 80 million illiterates in the 12- to 45-year age-group. The success of this and other literacy undertakings depends on several factors:

— the fight against illiteracy must be based upon the political will and commitment of the Member States themselves, the role of Unesco being to serve as a catalyst, to provide technical support and to prick the conscience of the international community and goad it into action in support of deserving national initiatives;

— the achievement of literacy ultimately depends upon the motivation of the learner, upon his or her conviction that mastering reading and writing matters and is worth the hours and efforts required. Motivation is most likely to be present when literacy instruction is part of a wider movement of progress and reform which promises to transform the life of the learner by awakening new hopes and opening new possibilities;

— literacy is, thus, not just a question of education. It is a complex process, a question of development in general and enhancement of human capabilities in particular, which calls for sustained and comprehensive action over decades. The struggle against illiteracy must be waged in the society as well as in the school. It calls for social, economic and cultural action as well as for education. The goal must be to make the right to education, proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a reality for all the citizens of our planet: be they children, youth or adults.

Mobilization of NGOs

9. For many decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an important role in literacy work. This work has taken place at all levels: international and national, and particularly at what is termed the 'grassroots' where actual literacy instruction occurs. The NGOs were among the first advocates of an International Literacy Year. They perceived it as a challenge to action and an opportunity to focus world attention upon the major global problem which illiteracy constitutes. At the initiative of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), more than thirty international and regional NGOs and other co-operating bodies have banded together to form the International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL). The ITFL had its first meeting in Toronto in October 1987. Subsequent meetings have taken place in Berlin (West), in Chantilly, France and, in April 1989, in Mombasa, Kenya. In these meetings, the ITFL has approved and launched an ambitious programme. On 2 March 1989, to cite an outstanding example, the ITFL, in co-operation with Unesco, organized press conferences in 44 cities around the world. The press briefings, which took place in literacy centres, were opened by a videotape which featured the actor Peter Ustinov; the Director-General of Unesco, Federico Mayor; James Duffy, of the American Broadcasting Company, who has played a key role in literacy initiatives in the United States; Dame Nita Barrow, the President of the International Council of Adult Education, and literacy learners from different continents. An evaluation of the media coverage of this event indicates that hundreds of millions of viewers were reached, many learning for the first time that 1990 will be International Literacy Year. Unesco is grateful to the governments who, by supporting the ITFL, have made it possible for the Task Force to play such a dynamic role in promoting ILY.

ITFL: an NGO Task Force on Literacy

'The Task Force envisions and expects a Year which will mark the beginning of a 10-year intensive effort to: dramatically reduce illiteracy in the world; mobilize resources from the grassroots and factory floors through governments and educational institutions; recognize that illiteracy is a problem of both industrialized and non-industrialized nations; not confuse a campaign against illiteracy with a campaign against illiterate people; link literacy to the achievements of social, economic and political democracy; strengthen the organizations of women, the poor, the jobless and the landless; result in increased empowerment of people, not increased dependency; and result most importantly in strengthened permanent structures for promoting literacy and adult education at governmental and non-governmental levels.'

Action by the United Nations family

10. The Director-General of Unesco has invited all United Nations agencies, as well as many regional intergovernmental organizations, to participate in the programme of ILY. The response to this request has been favourable. All of the major agencies are planning different activities related to the Year. Unesco's co-operation with the UNDP, the World Bank and UNICEF in the World Conference on Education for All has been noted above. Each Organization's action, of course, relates to its own field of specialization. The International Labour Organization, for example, is concerned with literacy in the training and retraining of workers, with the relationship of literacy to occupational safety and, more generally, with the problems illiteracy poses in the work place. The Food and Agriculture Organization is concerned with the role of literacy, education and training in the mastery of new agricultural processes and procedures. The World Health Organization's interest in literacy concerns the relationship between literacy and openness to improved nutritional and health practices. The Universal Postal Union has joined in promoting ILY by inviting national postal services to issue special stamps on the occasion of the Year. International Literacy Year is a United Nations year in which the entire United Nations family is concerned and involved.

Major events

11. Among the major events which will take place during International Literacy Year are:
— The World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, which will be held in Thailand from 5 to 9 March 1990. This Conference, to which heads of State and ministers of finance as well as ministers of education will be invited, is jointly sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, the World Bank and Unesco.
— The 42nd session of the International Conference on Education which will be held in Geneva, will be devoted to the review of national literacy and education plans. This Conference will be so timed as to serve as a follow-up on efforts by Member States to implement their national plans of action for literacy and education for all.
— The 25th celebration of International Literacy Day on 8 September 1990.
— Hundreds of other meetings taking place at world, regional, national and local levels will also feature International Literacy Year. These meetings will be of many kinds. Some will address the challenge of providing universal primary education to all children; others will address problems related to organizing out-of-school literacy instruction for youth and adults.

Publications and documents

12. The following Unesco publications have been issued or are planned on the occasion of ILY:
— 'Report of the Director-General on the Draft Programme for International Literacy Year and the Results of the Work Carried out for its Preparation' (document 24 C/67);
— 'Report of the Director-General on the Preparation of the Plan of Action for the Eradication of Illiteracy by the Year 2000' (document 24 C/78);
— *Objective: Literacy*, a tabloid devoted to ILY;
— a special issue of *Prospects*, a quarterly journal of education;
— a special issue of the *Unesco Courier*;
— two special numbers of *Adult Education: Information Notes*, and inclusion in all issues of a special section on ILY;
— *The Challenge*, a newsletter on ILY which will feature information on the major events of the Year;
— *International Literacy Year: A Guide*, which will provide basic information on the Year and suggestions for action;
— *A Practical Guide for Non-Governmental Organizations, Unesco Clubs, Associated Schools and other interested Groups*, published by the NGO Standing Committee as a contribution to ILY;
— a number of technical notes and other documents relating to different aspects of literacy work will also be issued.

Documentation on International Literacy Year can be requested from:

The Documentation Centre of the Education Sector (ED/SDI)
Unesco, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris, France.

13. The International Literacy Year Secretariat is encouraging and assisting organizations and journals to publish special issues or sections of regular issues devoted to ILY. Many journals and publications are doing so. The majority of these are concerned with different aspects of education, but a growing number of journals in other fields are also carrying news and articles on ILY. This is especially valuable because it extends the message to audiences which have not, as yet, been reached. It is also a recognition that illiteracy is not an educational problem alone, but a societal problem which touches all aspects of life. All institutions and offices associated with Unesco are being encouraged to take appropriate actions to promote ILY. The International Bureau of Education in Geneva, for example, is publishing a special series, *Literacy Lessons*, on the occasion of the Year. Some thirty to forty texts, usually of from ten to fifteen pages each, will appear. Some will deal with specialized aspects of literacy work; others will be essays or reflections by distinguished authors. The goal of the ILY information policy is not so much to reach specialists, but to inform the general public which has a direct concern—even if it is not fully aware of it—in the progress of education. Unesco is, of course, particularly concerned with promoting international exchanges and action in the field of education. A laudable example of such action is that being planned by the Canadian Association of Community Newspapers and CODE, a Canadian NGO, which will result in an exchange of articles and personnel between community newspapers in the Third World and those in Canada during ILY.

14. Member States may make requests for Unesco's technical and financial assistance to carry out activities related to ILY under the Participation Programme for 1990-1991. An effort will be made by the Unesco Secretariat to identify requests related to ILY and to handle them expeditiously in order that assistance will be received in time to carry out well-planned activities during 1990.

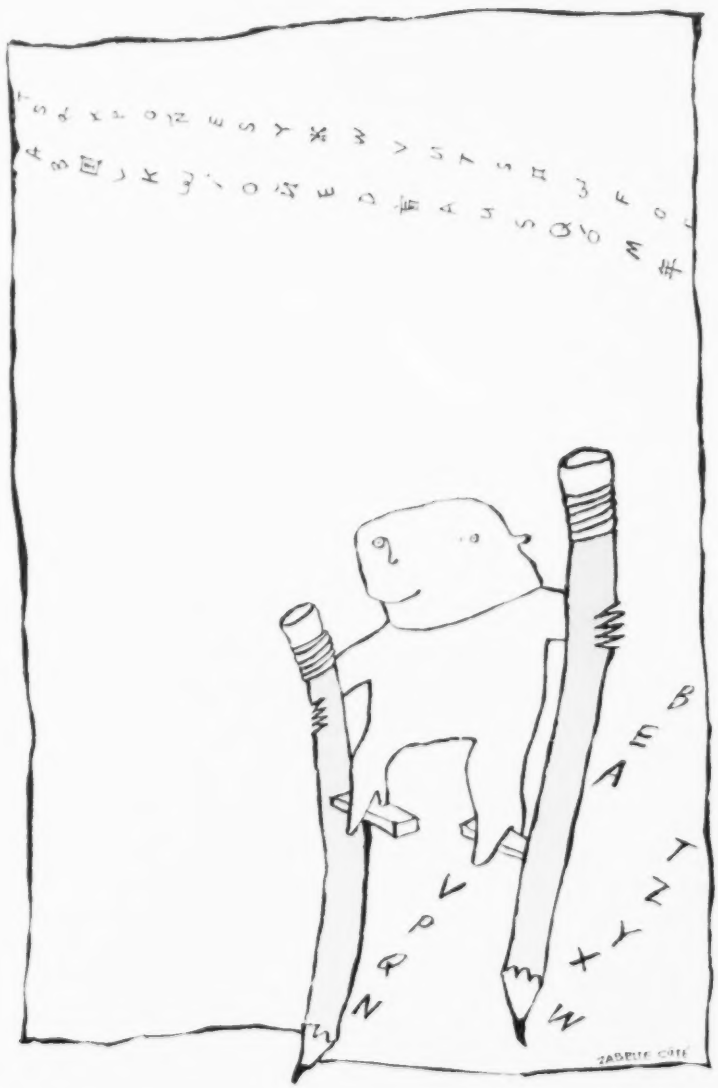
Last words

15. A last word: International Literacy Year is a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge to find the will and the ways to redress the problems of illiteracy and lack of educational provision which afflict nearly a billion people. It is an opportunity to focus the attention of governments and people upon these problems which constitute an offense to human dignity and an obstacle to development. International Literacy Year must be a summons to action, not a celebration. What is needed is action at all levels, but above all in the fields and on the factory floors. ILY will be remembered NOT for what is said, but for what is DONE during the Year and as a result of the Year.

'... education is the major force in shaping our futures as individuals and as societies, and literacy is the most essential of educational skills.'

Federico Mayor
Director-General of Unesco
16 May 1989

A 21 year-old Canadian art student, Zabelle Côté, was selected from among 53 finalists in a contest to design a poster for International Literacy Year. Miss Côté's poster was submitted by the Swiss National Commission for Unesco where she is studying graphic art and was the winner of the national competition. The artist, who grew up in Montreal, explains: 'I wanted a poster showing that illiteracy is a universal and global problem that can affect all of us. I put my character on stilts, in this case pencils, to indicate how the ability to read and write gives a person a new perspective on life and the world around him or her.'



1990 INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

This information note has been prepared and published by the International Literacy Year Secretariat of Unesco.